That's Entertainment

Chronicles of Culture

Volume 2, Number 3 May/June 1978

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Volume 2, Number 3 May/June 1978

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I wish I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch her cheek.

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Comment

I believe that a substantial, but nondescript, part of our worldview comes from a few books of fiction read on the threshold of adolescence. These, most often, are entertainment novels. Usually they are hardly what parents, teachers, or adult well-wishers, would be inclined to put into our hands at that time in our lives. The literary value of these books is relative. However, we have long ago abandoned the notion that entertainment and art do not jibe; after decades of exploring literary modes, we know that light reading can survive as a serious and profound proposition both to enlarge our knowledge and sublimate our sensitivities. Thus, our penchants and sympathies—no mean components of the personality—are formed under the giddy inebriations of quickly devoured pages.

Certainly, the standards of leisure fiction, literary as well as those of morals and manners, have continued to change during the last three centuries. There was a time when Walter Scott and Alexander Dumas served as edifying producers of exemplars for youth, although both of them nurtured far higher ambitions. With the proliferation of the book as a mass-product, leisure fiction has cheapened considerably. A definite socio-economic logic has been at work in this process. However, there is evidence that the most significant factor in shaping the contents of the recreational book market is the overall cultural climate, which is determined by prevailing moral attitudes, movements of ideas, and social trends, whose origins are in serious or artistic literature.

Thus, looking only at our age, we can safely assume that if dime books and Elinor Glyn were the leisure fiction of the '10s, Zane Grey and Edgar Wallace of the '20s, Vicky Baum of the '30s, Raymond Chandler of the '40s—we now have entered the post-Mickey Spillane era. Jacqueline Susann and Harold Robbins are its conditioners of minds and consciences. Their major contribution is that they, and their imitators, have turned the gist of entertainment literature from mawkish melodrama and lurid sensationalism into outright depravity. Their programmatic cynicism is so extreme that they arouse the suspicion that they are preordained by some ideological forces.

In the past, cruelty and kinky violence had to be allied to villainy and corruptness—the time-honored elements of junk reading. This is no longer so, as no coherence between gore and wickedness is required any more. Evil is admissible as sheer embellishment; the most morbid of acts clutter and intersperse the narration like TV commercials, fully independent of dramatic outlines. Spillane, Chase and their confreres portrayed fictional subrealities with which the society could cope; we could feel attracted by the gothic and lugubrious without losing the controlling power of rejection. The Robbinses and Susanns are an outgrowth of a literary epoch in which Genêt passes for a saint, Burroughs for a sage, and Vidal for a charmer, and this has proven a formidable threat to social sanity. Today's pulp hacks are bred on intellectual manure, their books putrefy the very fiber of normalcy, but are packaged and marketed as pleasure reading. The current adolescent mentality, bombarded with such mass-cultural offerings, forms its primary penchants and sympathies under their influence. And it would be foolish to think that the Robbinses and Susanns do not reach an adolescent mass audience.

Yet, it would be naive to scream "Horror!" "Woe!" or "Infamy!" and lament our lost pseudo-innocence without looking for the overall cultural chemistry of the phenomenon. To bewail our perverted socio-moral metabolism and demand a forcible eviction of depravity in its novelistic or cinematic expressions would make us even more powerless. As much as man profits from creativity, he is nevertheless helpless whenever moral necessities enter the field of the arts. There one has no chance against evil and ugliness. Ages ago, writers discovered that sin fares better than virtue in any description of human affairs and quandaries. Evil was the most fashionable topic of early Christianity, of its philosophy which was then indistinguishable from literature, of its journalism, as performed by monks in their incunabula. Thus, until very recently, an unwritten principle prevailed in the letters of Western civilization: serious literature should have a free hand in exploring the boundaries of man's condition, mind, destiny and feelings, whereas leisure fiction was to be conventionally moral in order not to confuse those who were seeking only pastime or forgetfulness. Cervantes and Flaubert trenchantly demonstrated the vulnerability of a reader's psychology, and their lessons were considered commanding for some time. The pragmatic application of morality became the touchstone for creative writers when approaching their chosen genre. So, while serious literature was accepted as the laboratory of the outermost limits of sinfulness and existential perils, books of entertainment had nothing to do with these purlieus. It was taken for granted that *Othello* would never launch a wave of violent crimes of passion, or Oedipus start an interest in incest, but it was well-understood that too much exposure to a mindless and unchastised Gareth Brendan, the subhuman "hero" of Robbins' novel (reviewed in the following pages), invites imitation among the subhumans who populate much of America these days. Werther and Bluebeard were never accorded equal rights. The suicidal fad that followed the former's popularity could not be considered a boon, but it didn't threaten society or civilization, and it might even be credited with a beneficial enrichment of emotions. With de Sade, the German and Russian literature of the latter part of the XIX century, and André Gide's *Vatican Caves,* we began to tread on thin ice. The arts were allowed to glamorize insanity and violence in the name of twisted utopian ideals, or just fulfillment of passions; the inadmissible borderline of evil became a literary test ground, and that tendency later turned into the prose of existential thrills. But that's another story.

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The basic narrative device which distinguished between trash writing and literature is found in the motivating force of the characters. In the past, entertainment's literary figures were moved through pages by sentimentality or the survival instinct; these two ingredients fused nicely into melodrama. Today, satiation seems the only reason for survival, which, of course, eliminates melodrama. The drive for satiation is an abject basis for existence; its fuel can only be crude sex or greed for money. The sense of power derived from them has to be among the most primitive human feelings. Violence becomes surrogate aesthetics: the degree of naturalism and expressionism in its portrayal is considered the stylistic mark of excellence of today's pulp writer; and its diversity attests to his or her "talent." In the XVIII century picaresque novel—that time's leisure fiction—the most potent device of the writer for engaging sympathy and attention was the resourcefulness of his protagonist. In the '70s, atrocity has become the supreme virtue of the trash author and his "hero." If we continue along this path, penetrating deeper and deeper the predilections of the youth, the old game of lions contra Christians seems inevitable as family entertainment in the foreseeable future.

But are the Robbinses, as repulsive as they are, solely responsible for all that? Have they been left to themselves to cruise uninhibited around the universe of human experiences, reactions and destinies? Not to my mind. Rather, they are mere surface manifestations of deeper forces. They hardly grasp them, but they instinctively understand how to milk a fast buck from them. What is at issue is the general human condition in the contemporary world. The prevalent liberal notion of it, the tenor or flavor of liberal ideas, emphasizes the sociological construction of human vicissitudes, or extols the superiority of a social order over a moral order—the routine liberal, post-Marxian fare for Americans, so difficult to challenge in the face of the liberal monopoly of the mass-media and mass culture. They engender a cultural climate in which the Susanns and Robbinses obtain a license to do what they want, write what they want, advocate what they want. No one would dream of mobilizing a national consensus against them as the liberals would claim that such a social outrage would abridge their constitutional rights. They take full advantage of this aura, as they are unmotivated by anything but the rapacious "idea" to serve themselves. This could be contained by a concerted effort from society, but not before the *New York Times Book Review* ceases to write about Sidney Sheldon, one of the trashiest of the lot, in this way:

> Whatever his failings as a writer, Sheldon is no lollygagger. His research is extensive. It doesn't matter that his glimpses of the houses of the mighty are as revealing as a four-shilling tour of the Tower of London. Sheldon has been there and he has done his work. He lavishes love and affection on the clichés, which are the building blocks of his writing, until they shine like so many Kohinoors. He is as diligent in laying out the rickety devices of his plotting as a Japanese sand sculptor. Sheldon is not an author callously writing down to his audience in hopes of picking up a quick few hundred thousand dollars. Like Jacqueline Susann, who is his spiritual den mother, Sheldon is a writer working at the height of his power. There is a passionate sincerity to his work that is unmistakable. He really believes this stuff, and the force of his commitment is powerful enough to drag us along with him.

It is doubtful that the *New York Times,* whatever its intentions, will cease to propagate and advertise Sheldon and his ilk. The *Times* pretends to be devoted to objectivity, but objectivity is no longer a sufficient weapon in the pandemonium of the modern mass culture. It is all too clear that, thanks to the specific influence of the media, uncondemned wickedness means wickedness promoted, that what is not forcefully denounced as evil becomes evil that is acceptable, if not encouraged. As our reviewer points out in this issue, the highlight of Sheldon's novel, so benignly lauded in the above excerpt from the *Times,* involves nailing a woman's knees to the floor. This is enough for me to suspect that the pop trash literary entertainment of the last decade has somehow achieved its popularity, wealth, weight and prestige with the casual sanction of the *New York Times* and its peers in the liberal establishment. Even though the honorable journal would probably self-righteously reject any responsibility for the consequences of such a silent acquiescence.

—Leopold Tyrmand

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Opinions & Views

The Soul of a Fast Writer

Howard Fast: *The Immigrants;* Houghton Mifflin Company; Boston.

by Otto J. Scott

Howard Fast is back on the best seller lists. The jacket blurb of *The Immigrants* describes it as "the story of three California families in the course of the twentieth century." Another name from the pro-Communist Thirties—Louis Untermeyer—adds his blessing to the offering. "More penetrating than most novels," says Untermeyer in italics, "it presents a sweeping vision of a widening America among the aliens who become the builders of a nation . . ."

That sounds both strange and familiar. How can aliens be also California families? And isn't the twentieth century a little late to build a nation here? However, to be strange and yet familiar is only part of the oddness of the work of Howard Fast, and Untermeyer's plug is—perhaps accidentally—apt. For Howard Fast's entire career is familiar, but very strange. Virtually exempt from serious criticism throughout his long and prolific efforts, Fast is unique in having enjoyed the best of opposing worlds. He has the odd distinction of having been hailed in Moscow, New York and Hollywood, of receiving the Stalin Peace Prize and of watching Kirk Douglas star in *Spartacus,* a movie based on one of Fast's historical distortions.

For many years no "progressive" library in the United States was without a copy of *Citizen Tom Paine*—a Fast portrayal of the 18th century revolutionary as a twentieth-century *apparatchik* in crazy clothes. During those same years the State Publishing Houses of the vast totalitarian empire managed from the Kremlin made Fast's work *mandatory high school reading* east of the Berlin Wall.

The special nature of that treatment becomes startling when contrasted with the fates of other writers, other works, in the last thirty-odd years. For Fast became popular with totalitarians after they had determined that writing is a political and cultural weapon. They mined the libraries of the West for suitable material, and the USSR lifted aloft Jack London and his Socialist tracts. But London was dead before Lenin's slave camps were created, and Howard Fast arose, with works the commissars considered ideal, long after death camps were spread across the landscape.

Fast was far from alone, of course, in serving the commissars. Writers of top, middle and low rank flocked toward the prizes, the flattering press, the fame that accrued to those who extolled the great Soviet experiment. Virtually all who served, however, met tragic fates. The handful of geniuses at the top, always difficult, met the most-publicized falls. Pasternak, briefly in favor, turned against the Soviet state, fell from grace and ended his life in despair. Orwell grew rebellious and was rejected by his British comrades, who disdain his work to this day. Ezra Pound broadcast for the Fascists, was incarcerated and lost his voice. Ossip Mandelstam spent his last years as a beggar and died in the manner of an animal denied shelter, in the snows of Siberia.

In March, 1978—22 weeks on the *New York Times Book Review* Best Sellers list.

Jurgen Ruhle, in a fascinating though depressing work, traced the ends of a large array of European and Soviet writers in a book called *Literature & Revolution* that deserves to be taught as a university course. And though the earlier work of many of the writers Ruhle traces is still extant, the fates of their authors are seldom discussed. Howard Fast's career is, of course, unfinished, and his name is not among those whom Ruhle examined. But that omission is natural enough from another viewpoint: Ruhle wrote about serious artists, and the name of Howard Fast has never been linked to any significant literary trend, nor with genuine art. He is, we are told, an entertainer. But the commissars are shrewd, and they are not noted for wasting money on entertainments. Even fairy tales are screened for ideological content before being approved by the State publishing houses. Therefore, their assessment of the usefulness of Fast's work should be taken seriously.

Howard Fast's appearance on our best-seller lists should also give rise to some examination, for these compilations have long aroused grave suspicion. It has been repeatedly proven that best-seller lists often ignore books that people actually buy, in favor of books that are packaged in advance and placed on the lists to promote — rather than reflect — sales, with an eye toward later movie distribution. In effect, expert observers now consider the best-seller lists manipulated—if not invented—by a small elite of shrewd operators with good publishing and Hollywood connections. In that sense Howard Fast's appearances on best-seller lists are as much triumphs with an elite as his successes east of the Berlin Wall.

Few authors have achieved such a double-jointed triumph in such disparate cultures, but Howard Fast has done it time and again. What is his secret? The answer to that lies between the lines of his work, for despite common myth, a writer cannot really fake his essence. All of his writing reflects his soul, no matter what his official opinions or public poses. And it is the soul of Howard Fast that evokes an answering echo in the breasts of the commissars of Moscow—and

Mr. Scott, a native New Yorker, published biographies of James I and Robespierre, and now writes from San Diego.

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Hollywood. In *The Immigrants,* that soul is bared for the world to see.

The novel opens with the arrival in America of an Italian couple, who, in a few opening pages, are cheated, subjected to brutal conditions and moved through a number of years to San Francisco. The husband eventually becomes a fisherman and wants his son to follow his trade. His wife objects. "This is America," she says, "It's not Italy. This is San Francisco. Italians are not peasants here; they are lawyers and doctors and storekeepers." This notion that Italy, with its treasures and genius, is a land of peasants is barely noticeable amid a jungle of brutal illiteracies that stud every page. From the start descriptions and dialogue is truncated, shorn of depth, unreal and hateful. By page thirty the San Francisco earthquake has erupted, and the city enjoys, amid the disaster, "a brief respite from the peculiar racial hatreds" the author describes.

Action swallows reason and events tumble as Howard Fast's America emerges in all its evil. A Chinese accountant is introduced, who lives under such prejudice that "there is not a moment in his life when he was not alert and wary." By page forty the hero is invited, on brief acquaintance, to the home of a Nob Hill banker who discusses business at the table, in 1910. Further improbabilities pile to mountainous proportions. Within a few more pages the banker's daughter has stripped naked, demanded sexual intercourse and ". . . washed away all that separated her from the whores in the Tenderloin."

By then it is appallingly clear that the mind of the famous Howard Fast is vulgar, and that he regards the human race through a prism of racial and religious stereotypes. His turns of plot and his people are alike mindless, barren of learning or deep emotion: they reflect the views of the basest elements of society, with their projections of limitless greed and brutal couplings.

Anomalies abound. Men on the waterfront in 1910 are quoted using the horrible obscenity m——f——r, at a time when such a word was not only unheard, but unthought. The hero's daughter, in 1928, repulsing the ardent advances of a suitor, pleads that she has herpes—a venereal disease unknown till the 1970's. A Chinese girl in 1910 terms herself a feminist—and so on. Fortunately for Fast he need not worry that his readers will find such illiteracies bothersome; anyone who can voluntarily read his novel all the way through is dead to nuance and barren of judgment.

What is far worse than the errors of time, place and dialogue, however, is the persistent venom; the darkened and even malign view of the human race that drips from every page. In 1928 even the memory of Alfred E. Smith is traduced, and he is supposed to appeal to the hero for campaign funds on the basis of their shared Catholicism, and to say, "We're a different breed from these cold Protestant bastards who own this country." That bias is attributed first to one character, and then to another. A Hollywood character, scornful of the concept of female virginity, says, "that whole notion is a con invented by some white Protestant-god-merchant."

The hero's wife, being both white and Protestant, is, of course, unfaithful—and is the only unfaithful wife in a collection that includes, as Fast never tires of telling us, Italian, Jewish and Chinese families. The hero is eventually divorced but his Protestant nemesis, having inherited the control of a large San Francisco bank, strips him of his remaining possessions after the market crash of 1929. The point that honest immigrants have no chance against the entrenched Protestants is, throughout, crudely and repeatedly stressed.

Once returned to poverty, however, the hero struggles with new and deeper thoughts. "I never really worked out," he says of his days of illusion, "what it means in this country to be Jewish or Italian or Chinese or Negro or Mexican . . ." Finally he returns to being a fisherman, becomes lean, bronzed and—once again—pure, and marries his long-suffering Chinese mistress. The saga, or at least this first third of a threatened trilogy, ends with some lines attributed to the Natural Way of Lao Tzu: ". . . he who does not desire to be ahead of the world becomes the leader of the world." Never has a book of less than 400 pages seemed so long.

Nevertheless *The Immigrants* is useful, for it bares Howard Fast. He has said he has broken with communism and now follows Zen—but that is unimportant. What is important is that his opinion of this nation and the majority of its people remains, as it has always been, prejudiced and unfriendly. That is important because his reappearance on the best-seller lists occurs at the same time as the resurgence of Lillian Hellman—after a long, not dissimilar hiatus from success. Fast also emerges at a time when other names, once nearly forgotten, that were held aloft during the Thirties, are again in lights. The drums are rolling for Fast, and for Hellman, and for Jessica Mitford, and others who have always been and some who have recently joined their special coterie. It is plain that a circle of sorts is being rounded. The propaganda machine that once provided Fast a Stalin Peace Prize for his denigrations of America and his service to the sowers of hate, is once again at work. Readers, beware. There is more than entertainment being offered. □

"Fast never parades his research, but each scene stands on firm detail. One of his best novels . . .[it's] the opener of a trilogy that is likely to be Fast's big bid for recognition as an artist. He does a lot of things right in this novel . . ."

—New York Times Book Review

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An Australian Saga about a Girl's Special Something

Colleen McCullough: *The Thorn Birds;* Harper & Row; New York.

by Whit Stillman

Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* is probably the biggest novel about farming since *So Big* by Edna Ferber. It's possibly even bigger.

To gauge this achievement accurately it must be mentioned that in 1924 Miss Ferber was considered, in the words of one major literary review, "the biggest novelist we have in this country." Her publisher more astutely claimed greatness for her as a "storyteller" rather than as a novelist, and perpetuated this euphemism by announcing its commercial fiction list each season under the headline, "The Storytellers."

Colleen McCullough is probably the biggest storyteller we now have in the English-speaking world. The story's size almost requires that it be treated in component parts—its style, setting, symbol, saga and theme.

The usual setting for a big farming novel is a big farm. Drogheda—the Australian sheep station to which nine-year-old Meggie Cleary, the novel's heroine, comes in 1921—has about 250,000 acres. It is the biggest farm ever treated in literature.

For a symbol the author suggests a species of birds, called the thorn birds. At least her prefatory paragraph implies this: "There is a legend about a bird which . . . searches for a thorn tree . . . Then, singing among the savage branches, it impales itself upon the longest, sharpest spike," and sings better than ever. "One superlative song, existence the price." What quality is most remarkable about such birds? Their extraordinary lack of intelligence. But that does not reduce their effectiveness as a symbol for the novel.

The saga is that of the Cleary family and, as the term suggests, extends through several generations. At the center is beautiful Meggie, the only girl among Fiona Cleary's seven children. Early on in the story, Meggie senses that she shares with her mother "a special something not common to Daddy and the boys, but there was no reaching beyond [her mother's] rigid back, those never still feet." As a child Meggie is the special delight of Ralph de Bricassart, the local priest whose handsomeness is frequently stressed. The larger part, however, of Ralph de Bricassart's "appeal and attraction lay not in his person, but in [an] aloof, almost godlike, very human something from his soul."

The novel's theme, at least through the first half, is distinctly modern—nearly all the characters are despicable or, at least, unalluring. Father Ralph, courting for the Church the fortune of Meggie's aunt, Mary Carson, gets the old woman infatuated with himself. "You're the most beautiful man I've ever seen," she tells him in one encounter. Then she puts her hand on his bare chest and declares, "You're a sybarite, Ralph, you lie in the sun. Are you tan all over?" In answer he takes off his clothes and stands naked before her: "Do you want me to make love to you, Mary?" (This all takes place during the 1920s.) But on her deathbed Mary retaliates for his taunt: *"Sham, sham, sham!* That's all you are Ralph! An impotent useless sham! Impotent man and impotent priest! I don't think you could get it up and keep it up for the Blessed Virgin herself! Have you ever managed to get it up, Father de Bricassart? *Sham!"* McCullough often raises religious questions in the novel.

The second modern theme she explores is gender confusion. At least her male characters seem to suffer from this. Her women all tend to be Women. Meggie shares this special something with her mother. Something else the Cleary Women share — the experience of bearing love-children — marks McCullough's return to traditional story-telling. After Meggie's loveless marriage to Luke O'Neill, she resolves to carry the child of Archbishop de Bricassart.

This was fated. "Each of us," she later tells Cardinal de Bricassart, "has something within us which won't be denied, even if it makes us scream aloud to die. We are what we are, that's all. Like the old Celtic legend of the bird with the thorn in its breast, singing its heart out and dying."

Another symbol McCullough invokes is actually a color, "ashes of roses"—Meggie's favorite shade, as she feels it goes with her reddish-golden hair. Her love scheme, Mrs. Cleary tells Meggie, is destined to turn to ashes of roses: "You won't get away with it any more than I did . . . You wait! You'll lose Dane, too." Meggie does lose Dane. He drowns in the Mediterranean shortly after his ordination as a priest. Ashes to ashes, roses to ashes of roses. "Oh, dear God, dear God!" Meggie exclaims to herself at one point. "No, not *dear* God! What's God ever done for me . . .? We're not too fond of each other, God and I." But what had Meggie ever done for God? She does not think of that.

On Drogheda the Clearys accept the news of Dane's drowning stoically. "They were strange, the Drogheda people. They didn't like company in grief: they preferred to be alone with their pain." They wanted solitude to mourn, the Drogheda people. In their agony they chose to be by themselves. They opted for crying in isolation, the Cleary folk. They were strange.

In April, 1978—47 weeks on the *New York Times Book Review* Best Sellers list.

Whit Stillman, formerly a reader and editor with Doubleday, is now the publisher of The American Spectator.

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Justine O'Neill, Meggie's legitimate child, breaks the unhappy tradition of the Drogheda Women. She falls in love with a man whose intentions are honorable, even tedious. He waits years before venturing a kiss, but then: "Thoughts and senses merged at last, but her cry was smothered soundless, an unuttered wail of gladness which shook her so deeply she lost awareness of everything beyond impulse, the mindless guidance of each urgent minute. The world achieved its ultimate contraction, turned in upon itself, and totally disappeared." This is the only unuttered wail in the book, the larger quality of which is similar to the quality of guidance each urgent minute gets above.

But *The Thorn Birds* has been a big success, one of the biggest we have had in this country. How can it be explained? Emerson said something to the effect that people do not deserve to have good writing, they are so pleased with bad. But that's not very kind. The real explanation for the novel's popularity might be simply: it was fated to be so. □

Recreational Revulsion and Self-Abasement

Elizabeth McNeill: *Nine and a Half Weeks: A Memoir of a Love Affair;* Henry Robbins/Dutton; New York.
Edna O'Brien: *I Hardly Knew You;* Doubleday & Co., Inc; New York.

by Nancy Yanes Hoffman

What are we doing to ourselves and why? What does sexual self-destruction reveal of the nature of our culture? About where we are going and why? Such are only a few of the questions that Elizabeth McNeill's (obviously a pseudonym) *Nine and a Half Weeks: A Memoir of a Love Affair* raises. The reviewer, recipient of a letter from the publisher which accompanied the book, is beset by problems when reading a book like this. Should one review this sado-masochistic chronicle, and by reviewing, call attention to what might be allowed to drop into the Wide Sargasso Sea of reader indifference? How does a well-respected editor, as is Henry Robbins, justify publishing what seems to be hard core pornography under his imprint?

I could be flip and reply that Dutton's excuse is that jargon phrase which argues for dubious ends excusing even more dubious means, the phrase, "the bottom line." Not good enough. For an editor like Robbins to print *Nine and a Half Weeks* seems to be a betrayal of responsibility, a symptom of the corruption tainting and pervading our "civilized" world. Robbins' letter reveals his own uneasiness, his compulsion to explain and equivocate; Robbins comments: "What some may regard as pathological behavior can also be seen in another light: simply human. In my view, this book is at once an account of a special kind of addiction (perhaps more prevalent than most of us realize) and an explanation of the outer boundaries of sexual, and therefore human, behavior." Again, not good enough.

We are not born human and civilized. We are, at the beginning, a human potentiality. We learn, or try to learn—and keep forgetting — how to be civilized, how to be human and humane, how to be for ourselves and for others now. That mankind can figure out more exquisite means of brutalizing one another, of imposing our wills, is nothing new. The torture chamber museums of every era and country, the horrors of the holocaust, attest to man's inhumanity to man—or woman—in the name of power's intoxications.

Most frightening about McNeill's non-fictional account of supposedly actual experience (as opposed to *The Story of O,* as "fantasy") is the degradation which the narrator matter-of-factly wishes for, permits, willingly complies with: "So it went, a step at a time. And since we saw each other every night; since each increment of change was unspectacular in itself; . . . it came about that I found myself—after the time span of a mere two weeks—in a setup that would be judged, by the people I know, as pathological. It never occurred to me to call it pathological. I never called 'it' anything . . . I dare only look back on those weeks as on an isolated phenomenon, now in the past; a segment of my life as unreal as a dream, lacking all implication."

Nine and a Half Weeks' implication is in the title of the "porn flick" that McNeill and her master (for never was she his "mistress;" his appeal for her was the total abandonment of self to him), that "attractive, well-educated, middle-class," executive couple, didn't have "time" to see, "Beyond All Limits:" "After three days I've gone beyond my limits. For two months now, I've been out of control." If too much control is stultifying, confining, deadening, so too is drunken driving, sensation for sensation's sake, obsession with the senses without sense or reflection or thought, a desperate death. Nerve endings can be crushed by too much as well as too little. And in her ceding of herself to him, the narrator is as imprisoned in solitary confinement as is any sexually inhibited woman or man.

If this relationship (and most obscene of all is her calling this a "love affair") is a metaphor for the domination and humiliation which exists between all men and women, as Robbins avers, nobody dominates and nobody is humiliated without the victim's assent. Finally, the narrator cracks, can't stop crying. Her Nazi takes her to a hospital and she never sees him again. Her last lines, unreflective to the end, are: "It's been years and sometimes I wonder whether my body will

Nancy Yanes Hoffman has just been awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend.

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ever again register above lukewarm." Has she learned anything except "that my sensation thermostat has been thrown out of whack"? Not that I can see. McNeill's inability to see the implications of her affair, her complicity, is the most horrifying aspect of her story.

The Irish novelist Edna O'Brien fails badly with *I Hardly Knew You,* which probably never would have seen the light of day, had it been submitted by an unknown. In the past, O'Brien's novels and short stories have focused on what she called "The Love Object," in one of her short stories. Almost always set in the bedroom, O'Brien's theme usually is the adulterous passion of a young woman for an older man. Never able to extend their emotional base beyond the bedroom's four walls, O'Brien's women are enlarged by, tortured by, stultified by, abandoned by the object of their passions. Too-consciously erotic, her works seem unconsciously didactic, as they limn the extramarital minuet: titillating curiosity, consummation, female adoration adding up to a gratified—and quickly bored—male indifference.

In O'Brien's new novel, an older woman has an affair with a man half her age (*in this country,* half one's age plus one year is the male convention, although why such behavior is acceptable for men is beyond my ken). The young man has an epileptic seizure in bed, and his mistress murders him. This murderous violence as a response to an illness whose greatest complication is social discrimination, is sickening—particularly from a writer supposedly known for her "sensitivity." The O'Brien bedroom walls have closed in, like some trap in *Mission Impossible.* Only reader revulsion is left, and the nagging sense that O'Brien is long overdue for a move beyond her claustrophobic bedroom prison.

O'Brien's and McNeill's books both focus in strange ways on loss of control. Orgasm is at least a semi-willing loss of control, a seizure of desire, yet O'Brien's protagonist, who tells her bizarre tale from prison, murders from revulsion at witnessing an epileptic's seizure, his total loss of control to the electrical aberrations, the private physical demons, which without warning possess him. O'Brien's narrator is Nora (is her inhumanity the price women pay for slamming the doll house door?); her young lover is Hart (does she kill the heart within him because his abandonment to his disease is greater than any seizures with her?). Like an "unenlightened" medievalist, O'Brien equates the epileptic convulsion with the erotic convulsion. Were this a better book, one might examine O'Brien's mistaken peasant analogies. As it is, such an exercise is not worth the trouble.

It's a big lonely world out there—and in here. We all fail each other, fail knowingly and unknowingly; we all need comfort, consolation. However, neither of these two books is about sexuality as fun, solace, consolation, "love," the magic mystical synchrony of the Keatsian moment, the right person at the right time. McNeill and O'Brien in non-fiction and fiction depict sexuality as perverse, dehumanizing. In their supermarkets of sensation, love and sickness are equated, and sexuality becomes a toxic agent. A sad commentary on what should be the most intimate, fulfilling satisfaction in our anonymous, unsatisfactory, fractured world. □

Scum As Modern Hero

Harold Robbins: *Dreams Die First;* Simon & Schuster, Inc.; New York.

by Stephen R. Maloney

Harry Robbins' fourteenth novel is a book whose main reason for being is to make a very wealthy man, Robbins, even richer. I suspected it would be ill-written, derivative and morally scabrous. Robbins never disappoints.

The protagonist of *Dreams Die First* is, like Robbins, a merchant of sexual fantasies. When Gareth Brendan is not snorting cocaine, mowing down hired killers with his Rolls Royce, or sodomizing beach boys, he is building a business empire based upon a sex magazine called *Macho.* Today's entrepreneur, it seems, does not build a better mousetrap; he creates a more vulgar "centerfold."

Gareth Brendan has much in common with Larry Flynt, publisher of *Hustler.* At this moment, the publisher of *Hustler* is lying paralyzed from the waist down—a grim irony—in a Georgia hospital. With the assailant still at large, one can speculate if he (or she?) was a *Hustler* reader, one who took the magazine's implicit message of contempt for others literally.

Ernest van den Haag finds the center of pornography in its view of life as consisting of organs and orifices and the permutations thereof. Perhaps we could expand this to say that pornography takes violence against others, especially maniacal stabbings and shootings, and calls it sexuality. The violent thrustings and penetratings of pornography remind us not of lovemaking but of maniacal stabbings, brutal beatings, of bullets being pumped into violently contorted bodies. Pornography, in other words, is sublimated murder. Many realize this, in our society, however, nothing is done to stop the murder. And those who counsel against doing anything against it, do so in the name of freedom and democracy.

In pornography, sexuality means not freedom but control. In *Dreams Die First,* Gareth's boy-lover tells him he wants to be his "slave." One of Gareth's girl-friends habitually sneaks into his apartment and dons a French maid's outfit the better to "serve" him. And another girlfriend

In April, 1978—23 weeks on the *New York Times Book Review* Best Sellers list.

Dr. Maloney taught English poetry at the Universities of Rochester and Georgia and now works for a major oil company in Oklahoma.

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becomes Gareth's employee and accountant in the sex-magazine empire.

Money is another element in the mystique of control and dominance that pervades the world of the pornographer. The gushing blurb-writer of Robbins' novel tells us that Gareth lives in "a world of total pleasure and hedonism, in which money and sex are almost indistinguishable; a world that includes drugs, far-out sex and violence; a world so rich it is almost out of Gareth's control." This is the world Robbins inhabits, and he clumsily proselytizes for it in his books.

Images of bondage, torture and forced sex continually recur in *Dreams Die First.* The heroes are as violent and coercive as the villains in such a world.

The pleasure that such a book asks us to partake of is not the release of sexuality but the tight control exercised by the sadist. Every pornographic book must remind us of the link between pornography and murder in the Nazi death camps. For pornography strips not only its characters but also its readers. By denying the worth of others, it undermines the historic religious and moral prohibitions against murder. The danger of pornography lies not so much in its sexual explicitness as in its underlying philosophy: that other human beings exist essentially for (and at) our pleasure.

Of course when the pornographer and his lawyer arrive in court they are wearing the First Amendment. And they recite *ad nauseam* our contemporary version of the Golden Rule: "Anyone can do anything they (sic) want, as long as they don't hurt anyone else." But, of course, it is precisely this responsibility to respect the human weight and dignity of others that pornography in its enactments denies.

The publisher who personally, or through his minions, arranges men and women in degrading positions—violates them sexually, as they said in an earlier age—is engaging in both a commercial transaction and an act of violence. So does a photographer and a filmmaker.

For the first time in my life, let me agree with Gloria Steinem. When asked to sign a letter in support of Larry Flynt, she angrily commented that he should be put in jail for encouraging crimes against women. Of course, Mr. Flynt, the born-again pornographer, is the very model of contemporary trendiness, at once a martyr, a Jesus Freak and a sex merchant. So he knows enough to mouth the conventional platitudes about women's rights.

But in showing women (and men, for that matter) as contemptible beings he is removing—like Robbins—the rationale behind civilized treatment of human beings. In the world of *Hustler* and of *Dreams Die First,* the First Amendment means little more than the right to utter lewd remarks. Now we have reached the state where "kiddie porn" merchants argue their inalienable right to distribute material showing six year-olds being sexually abused by geriatric lechers. And a society that cannot protect its children should exercise its free speech in asking forgiveness.

W.B. Yeats was a man who knew much about the capacity for violence that is always ready to erupt in man. He said that civilization is a great struggle to keep self-control. At present, we are losing that struggle. □

Number One Garbage

Sidney Sheldon: *Bloodline;* William Morrow & Co.; New York.

by Joan Surrey

Librarians are committed to obtaining for patrons what they want even if they don't agree with their taste. This is why librarians are perennially confronted with the puzzle: from what springs the public's obvious dedication to keeping abreast of the Best Seller List? Is it a remnant of the adolescent's automatic response to peer pressure that keeps so many reading the same things? Do they do it because they haven't enough information to make an independent judgment or because they mistrust their own judgment?

A writeup of *Bloodline,* which made its harshest criticism of the abundance of clichés, did not adequately convey reasons for *not* reading this novel. We all know that there is definite provision in the cyclical, anti-machine nature of man for nonsense and fun—fantasy, whimsy, and banality. But conning people into callousness about inflicting mental hurt and physical harm on their fellows in the name of current fashion or false rebellions against misunderstood earlier values—that's another story. Rubbing our psyches in the worst that is possible until our sleep is uneasy and we move in dulling clouds of suspicion is utilizing our leisure to further erode our hard-won perspective about what we have and are vs. what we want and should be.

If only criminal and unnatural acts contain enough excitement to interest us nowadays, then we had better not expect much from the future. It will take months for one's conscious and subconscious to submerge some of the sordid mental images conjured up by *Bloodline.* This, however, seems to be Mr. Sheldon's literary ambition.

In April, 1978—9 weeks on the *New New York Times Book Review* Best Sellers list.

When a work of fiction climbs to first place on the *New York Times* list of best sellers in just six weeks, you can bet it contains lots of explicit sex and suspense. Sidney Sheldon specializes in and has been striking it rich with both. This latest book is based loosely on a Christina Onassis-like heiress who takes over her father's international pharmaceutical empire after his death in a mountain climbing accident.

Mrs. Surrey is Public Services Librarian at Rockford College.

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The title "Bloodline" refers to the family-owned nature of the business founded by a Jewish chemist from Poland. Intrigue centers around the efforts to influence Elizabeth Roffe, the heiress, to make the company stock public so various relatives can convert their stock into more liquid assets. Most of the book is taken up with flashbacks which reveal why many of the family members on the Board of Directors urgently need access to the large sums of money possible if they can sell their holdings, as gambling debts, an impending confrontation between a wife and a mistress unless one million dollars is paid, etc. are their existential priorities. According to her father's will, Elizabeth is the only one who can make this decision. When she appears reluctant to do so, several attempts are made on her life.

A computer-tapping, country-hopping detective named Max Hornung is equal to the task of sorting out the nefarious financial dealings of the various directors. He eventually learns which relative is most desperate and dangerous, and he helps rescue the heroine from the villain at her blazing Sardinian villa.

These business executives are portrayed with exquisite attention to details dear to the hearts of the socially ambitious like what food and wine were ordered at which famous restaurants, details about art objects decorating their many homes, and the types of sports cars driven.

The pace of the novel is fast since major characters keep their passports with them continually and dash about in company-owned jets. Stylistically, the author strings together an incredibly large number of clichés. Somehow he manages to maintain your interest by changing the location of his characters often and by sprinkling their situations liberally with the salt of sex and the pepper of desperation.

Sex scenes include the making of pornographic snuff films, an especially sickening type of murder. If people generally have become so inured to kinky sex and violence that they enjoy reading about a woman's knees being nailed to the floor, this is their kind of a novel. But, then, Christians had better again beware of lions—when Sheldons roam freely on the best-seller list, any sadism is possible in the jaded, decadent atmosphere they create.

Aside from one murderer being killed in his own trap, there is nearly nothing of redeeming value in the entire novel. The librarian, thus, cannot stop marvelling at why educated, practical and rational Americans, who support a publishing industry that brings out more of such titles each year than the rest of the world put together, continue to pour so much money into trash writers' pockets. Do we receive our money's worth in pleasure from such a formula-written, escapist story so far from the actual concerns of most of us? Do Americans perhaps regard one dimensional business tycoons with the same compulsive curiosity lavished on royal families in other countries? Is there any comfort in demonstrating that for all their wealth, these characters have not found happiness nor do they ever have enough funds to satisfy their escalating wants? If economic and physical gratification only spirals on to ever fancier needs in one's public and private worlds, then such a treadmill should be questioned by a more influential socio-moral force than book reviewing, and the sooner it is done, the better.

John Gardner, a well-known fiction writer himself, has just completed a serious critical work entitled *On Moral Fiction.* His standards for judging the worth of a piece of fictional writing are: it

> ". . . clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns. It does not rant. It does not sneer or giggle in the face of death. It invents prayers and weapons. It designs vision worth trying to make fact."

This recipe for literature must make the Sheldons of our time and their publishers cower and jeer at the same time. But sometime, somewhere a line must be drawn and we must begin to defend ourselves. Let's start by shunning Sidney Sheldon's latest trash. □

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles of Culture:*

Critical Choices

". . . America is now more than ever a pluralistic society. But a dangerous myth has been deceptively sustained that the American culture is still open to the diversity of philosophical and ideological propositions, and that they all have an equal chance of being argued for and listened to. In point of fact, the more society, honoring its initial promise of equal human rights and opportunities, opens up to various ethnic groups, their traditions and folkloric paraphernalia, the more pluralism is expelled from the culture. American culture, once the haven of free consciences and religious variety, has become monopolized by one ideological formation—'enlightened' and 'progressive' liberalism."

from *Comment*

Also:

Opinions & Views — Commendables — In Focus — Waste of Money — The American Scene — Stage — Journalism — Polemics & Exchanges.

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Commendables

A Tyrant of Mind and Failed Healer

Leo Raditsa: ***Some Sense About Wilhelm Reich;***
Philosophical Library; New York.

by Christopher Manion

"One does individuals and their theories the greatest compliment when one sees their limitation," observes Leo Raditsa in this short but captivating essay. And indeed Raditsa means to bestow a compliment on Reich, whose impact on the ideas of our age has been pervasive, as well as to discuss his limitations. One must admit, though, that this latter contribution is the more welcome of the two.

Raditsa displays a thorough knowledge of Reich's teaching without recapitulating it; instead, he concentrates on the factors which tell us not only about Reich, but about man, power, the intellect, and our own cultural drift as well. He is well-equipped to do so—thoughtful and charitable in his criticisms, but honest enough to submit for examination the paradoxes of Wilhelm Reich which often evade discussion because they are so difficult to discuss; instead, Raditsa explains, Reich is either acclaimed as a hero or dismissed as a villain. But his ideas live on, and will bear some measure of unarticulated power until they receive the discussion they deserve. Hence, some "sense" about Wilhelm Reich from a classical scholar who has absorbed himself in Reichian teaching for twenty years.

Reich finds man completely at odds with nature and his own "true" self. So profound is this loss of reality that man has a built-in "armor" to protect him from discovering himself. But Reich's image of the problem of man is far from that depicted in the Platonic myth of the cave: Reich sees man as hopelessly bound up in a rationality which keeps him *from* his nature; hence, we can conclude, the intellect must be suppressed, and philosophy destroyed (not pursued), for man to be free.

Mr. Manion is an officer of the Rockford College Institute.

Reichian therapy aims at the destruction of rationality and the armor that protects it through a process by which the patient's vulnerability is enhanced even as his dependence on Reich (through his doctrine and his therapist) becomes complete. Reich found man's problem complicated by a tendency to meekly accept tyranny without protest; hence, Reich merely substitutes his own tyranny, insisting that the patient accept an iron-clad rule over his life by means of a treatment involving the liberation of sexuality (which is closer to "freedom" than is rationality), self-debasement (which encourages a healthy disgust with one's self, a good sign of progress), and an eventual emergence into a new existence where, one might surmise, the patient sees the world as Reich sees it, and all is well.

To Reich, the whole world was a patient: he could not distinguish between the world at large and a patient undergoing therapy. He insisted on the universal validity of his teachings, and that provides a key to an understanding of his shortcomings, as Raditsa explains in his own case:

> "As a young man when I first grew interested in Reich's work I was fascinated (and thought I was impressed) by such absolute claims, claims that would admit of no doubt. I took them for assurance. I wanted the answers and I wanted them in a hurry. Now . . . well, now the difference between facts, and something one wishes, one wants, one knows has to be true impresses me."

Reich's shortcomings might also shed light on the chronic ailment of an age which could welcome such a tyrant of the mind. For, while Reich's therapy might do nothing more than transfer a patient from one dream world into another, an age clamoring for authority and fleeing rationality would welcome such a blatant assertion of power in the name of a "freedom" and "nature" not subject to discussion. And, while Reich eventually abandoned his earlier Marxism, he never came to terms with it, and yet his teachings—not because of Reich but in spite of him—contribute to an understanding of the frame of mind which adheres to a "scientific" ideology so constantly in conflict with reality. Reich insisted that his teaching should have priority over the ultimate good of the patient, and by sheer force of will and ignorance (for he insisted on it: no *discussion,* just *subjection*) he managed to garner a questionable claim to "heroism" (in an age without heroes) without agreeing to subject himself to the risk which all heroes must run: that they might be wrong.

Mindless idolatry which excludes criticism tends to destroy the ability to think independently, says Raditsa, and this probing critique should be welcomed as a contribution to thoughtful discourse in an unthoughtful age. □

Crane's Resolve and Ryan's Expertise

Philip M. Crane: ***Surrender in Panama;***
Green Hill Publishers, Inc; Ottawa, Illinois.
Paul B. Ryan: ***The Panama Canal Controversy;***
Hoover Institution Press; Stanford, Calif.

Whether or not this book had an effect on the Panama Canal treaties vote, it did succeed in articulating the conservative polemics used to spearhead the anti-ratification drive. For Congressman Philip Crane, the Panama Canal is of pivotal economic, strategic and moral importance to the United States. He thinks that the canal will be a crucial energy throughway in the near future; by 1980, 45% of all Alaskan oil will pass through the canal. With the military and commercial trend pointing toward smaller, more specialized vessels, the canal will be needed *more* in years to come than it

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is now.

Strategically, as 96% of the U.S.'s "one ocean" naval fleet can still pass through the canal, any limitations on its mobility could paralyze our naval capabilities. Furthermore, the inhibition of U.S. presence in the Caribbean would diminish efforts to check the growing Marxist threat in the Caribbean and Central America. And in the end the surrender of the canal would further weaken America's image to the rest of the world.

Crane bases these and other arguments largely on what will happen when the worse fears of Panamanian control of the canal become a reality. He makes no secret of his distrust of the Panamanian government and its intentions. Not only has the Republic of Panama had 60 governments in its 71 years of existence, but the "tinhorn dictator" General Omar Torrijos has increased the Panamanian debt by nearly 1000% since seizing power. The vagueness of the treaties' key provisions have already led to significant disparities of interpretations between U.S. and Panamanian spokesmen. Finally, why give away property that the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903 (and confirmed by Supreme Court decisions) clearly established as U.S. territory—territory bought and paid for by the U.S. with Panama's consent and blessings? Should America surrender a canal that it built (and paid for), efficiently operated and defended (while helping Panama to achieve independence and attain one of the highest per capita income levels in Latin America) to the dictator of a "politically and morally questionable regime?"

The irony of Representative Crane's push to mobilize forces against the treaties is that he has little to say in the actual political decision-making: only the Senate is constitutionally entitled to ratify treaties. But Philip Crane, who earned his Ph.D. in American history with a minor in Latin American studies, plainly relishes using his expertise as he delineates his opposition. And by elevating the conservative challenge to the treaties above simple party rhetoric, Crane hopes that educating and persuading the American public against the treaties will be one and the same job.

Crane's fighting spirit is amply supported by the impressive collection of arguments and data in Captain Paul B. Ryan's, U.S.N., book *The Panama Canal Controversy.* He speaks on the subject with authority and acumen acquired during his naval and diplomatic career in the Caribbean. A chapter entitled "Sea Control and Maritime Choke Points" seems particularly elucidating to a layman and is fully convincing in its inferences. □

Wooten's Challenge

James Wooten: ***Dasher: The Roots and the Rising of Jimmy Carter;***
Summit Books; New York.

Mr. Wooten obviously belongs to that vanishing breed of newspapermen who are fascinated by the trivia of truth. It's an unfashionable proclivity in times when reporters have discovered the new profitability and new methods of marketing "truth": rather than submitting to the demands of dishonorable power brokers, they cater to the even more dishonorable fad-and-myth producers. Journalist Wooten, however, is less awed by presidents than he is by their cunning, tricks, masks and disguises. Cunning in politics can be seen as either an honorable or dishonorable feature: it is up to the man in the White House to personally perform in such a way that the difference distinctly comes across—and he can then be judged on the merits of his performance.

Up to now, there have been plenty of indications that Mr. Carter's cunning, and his performance, are somewhat less than honorable. That he has managed to hoodwink both the public and the media about himself is disturbing. And we are going to have to pay for our naivete in taking him for both a shrewder and more sincere man than he really is. Time and time again, our political conscience, or our soft political underbelly, has proven vulnerable to electoral show biz, and Carter hit us with an exceptional force of artifice. He succeeded in assembling an image of intelligence, sensitivity, reliability and decency, while of late we have begun to wonder whether he isn't merely smart, calculating, conforming and effectively self-serving. During the last two years, his abundantly trumpeted spirituality has distilled to ambitiousness. Wooten registers all this with a clear eye and well-oiled typewriter. Too little emphasis, in our opinion, is put on the ominous vulgarity of the first family, whose meretricious comportment departs so markedly from even the folksiest ways of presidential kin in the past. □

Wilson's Kipling

Angus Wilson: ***The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling: His Life and Works;***
Viking Press; New York.

By now, there's little doubt that Britain's hasty relinquishment of colonialism (what an ugly word to describe such a complex phenomenon) in the aftermath of World War II was a perplexing process that somehow brought more confusion than purification to history and the world. It contributed to the collapse of the United Kingdom and Englishness rather than elevating them to new moral heights. Whether or not it advanced the socio-civilizational maturity of the liberated people, one can't help feeling that some of them, chiefly those in Africa, could have used a few more decades of benign tutelage and well-paced progress before moving on to statehood. Rudyard Kipling had an accurate view of this situation and was, perhaps, the only one who could articulate his beliefs with such awesome literary and intellectual force. He thus had to bear the wrath of England's noblest and most short-sighted consciences. Despite his views he won a Nobel Prize, which in 1907 was still dispensed solely on the basis of artistic merit. The furor of the do-gooders was no less vicious than that of the chauvinistic oppressors and Kipling, over a period of years, had to endure the accusa-

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tions of political hysteria served him daily by the Bloomsbury coterie and the unified British left. His adroitness in subtly and poetically chronicling the psycho-cultural intercourse between the conqueror and the conquered was slighted and despised, his presentiments scorned. In his writing, the osmosis of civilizations blended open hatreds and subliminal fascinations into human fates—and the radical British intellectuals who clamored against this feat appear to us now like the monkeys in the *Jungle Book* who react to what they dislike with a disgusting din. Mr. Wilson, a distinguished English writer, notes all of this with the delicate touch of a responsible biographer. He cannot resist the temptation, however, to "modernize" Kipling's relationship with his literary agent, an American by the name of Wolcott Balestier—as if simple friendship between men has been once and forever erased from the surface of the earth by an edict from the Gay Task Force in San Francisco. □

In Focus

Lebowitz's Seminal Torments

Fran Lebowitz: ***Metropolitan Life;***
Henry Robbins/E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc.; New York.

Judging by her photograph, Fran Lebowitz looks like a feminist radic-lib Greenwich Village storm trooper. Contrary to the externals, her book reveals a mind tormented by the finest enigmas of existence. She seems to remain in a state of non-stop confrontation with the Liberal Culture's cruelest clichés. She boldly proclaims the subtlety of thinking, a human being's most precious ally. We, in the Midwest, know that thoughtfulness is a value, but to affirm the same in Manhattan nowadays amounts to a heroic stance. She must be fully aware of the perils she faces in that wilderness of liberal publishers, editors and trendsetters, after having written and published sentences like:

> "Women who insist upon having the same options as men would do well to consider the option of being the strong, silent type . . . Communists all seem to wear small caps, a look I consider better suited to tubes of toothpaste than to people . . . There is no such thing as rock-and-roll in Italy, so all the kids there want to be movie stars instead of heroin addicts. This is very pertinent news if you have a taste for the underaged because it means that it is possible to have an entire conversation with a 15-year-old without feeling as if you have to throw up." □

Martin's Malaise

Malachi Martin: ***The Final Conclave;***
Stein and Day; New York.

Malachi Martin, a former Jesuit but still faithful Roman Catholic theologian and writer, has come up with a set of questions, suspicions and conjectures which may seem revelationary to the majority of American Catholics, but sound old hat to the patient observers of the Eastern European scene. In a partly fictional account of the present and the foreseeable future of the Catholic Church, Mr. Martin makes it clear that there are forces within the Vatican which are banking on the political conquest of the world by the Marxist creed institutionalized in the Soviet state. Thus, in order to survive in such a world, some power brokers in the Catholic hierarchy have proposed a peace between the philosophies, have established a pattern of coexistence, and have divided the spheres of influence of the future.

The proponents of this uncanny alliance infer that now may be the only opportunity to do so, while the Vatican still has some chips on the table and wields an awesome might in some societies. By supporting the "exploited and oppressed" who allegedly dream about the communist take-over in Latin America and Asia, the Church can then associate itself with the winning side and put itself in a position to strike bargains with the victors and rulers of the new societies. The dialectics of such a theory is supposed to be perfectly compatible with the Christian ethos: there's a deeply seated Catholic tradition of championing the cause of the poor and since the Catholic kingdom is not of this world, it is once again rendering unto Caesar what is his.

Immediately after World War II, the Soviet secret police, pouring into the Catholic nations of Eastern Europe in the wake of the invading Soviet armies, scouted for collaborationists. They found them among the ranks of the pre-war Fascist henchmen who masked their totalitarianism with their noisily promulgated allegiance to tradition. Having little trouble adapting to Red totalitarianism, they soon started subverting the Church for their new masters. By the time Pope John XXIII assumed the Holy Seat, the fascist-Catholics-turned-marxian-neophytes-and-proselytizers were solidly entrenched in the Vatican's Eastern European politics. They worked to subvert the solid Catholic hierarchy which stood firm against Communism in the post-World War II reality. However, the natural rejection of Communism by the Catholic masses in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, reenforced by inspired leaders like Cardinals Mindszenty and Wyszynski, proved to be durable even against the complots of the KGB and Gestapo experts backed by several misguided pragmatists of the Eastern European bishopry.

The most significant post-war phenomenon is the emergence and success of a new Catholic intellectualism in the areas where Marxism has tried to become the official, rigidly observed and brutally enforced "faith." In contrast to the expectations of the pro-Communist clergy of the West who demand nothing more than survival in a future world dominated by Marxism, Catholic thought and literature seems to be developing and blooming in the very areas where Communism reigns. New spiritual bonds between the

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Church and the anti-communist masses seem to crystallize under the totalitarian pressures. Thus, Malachi Martin's premonition, though often simplistically formulated, that the acute danger of a compromise between the Kremlin and Vatican is to be looked for in the West, not the East, makes sense. There are more perils in the pseudo-socio-ideology of a Graham Greene, the antic "Christian idealism" of the Berrigans, the supra-emotionalism of the Brazilian episcopate, the misguided demogoguery of a Chilean cardinal than there are in the pro-marxist machinations in the corridors of any conclave. Ironically, the most reliable Catholic bulwark against the onslaught upon the Christian soul today is found in the human minds behind the Iron Curtain, not on the riverbanks of the Tiber. □

Waste of Money

Vidal's Squirt of Venom

Gore Vidal: *Kalki;*
Random House; New York.

Another product, in the form of a book, from one of the most despicable banderilleros in the arena of contemporary fiction. In current American letters, Vidal, who is the product of an interconnection between liberal publishing houses and the fashion industry, represents something which we can safely call a modish nihilism. This nihilism is being marketed through a joint effort by *Vogue* and the *New York Review of Books,* an organ of mesmerizers who have convinced a large part of the American academy that partisan indecency in literary criticism is the equivalent of impartial decency. Mr. Vidal's "philosophy" propagates ludicrous phobias and schizoid vituperations. It is in the same epistemological vein as custom-tailored farmer's overalls from Bloomingdale's, and Mr. Vidal is its incontestable champion. He perfumes it with pederasty and the million dollar honoraria he receives for his anti-bourgeois writings. *Kalki,* his latest novel, can best be understood with the help of shoddy, post-Freudian stereotypes: in it, Mr. Vidal seems to condemn what in fact he fervently worships, craves and recommends in all his literary works. His viscera, overloaded with caviar and *paté de foie gras,* are so swollen with a passion for revenge against the Americans who provided him with all the riches he enjoys that *Kalki* cannot be read as a satire, even though Vidal suggests that it should be accepted as such. His reverie includes the destruction and mutilation of primary human bonds, which he deems "unrefined"; he yearns for an "I-told-you-so!" victory over the "rottenness" of America—for which the *NYRB* loves him so dearly. He thus concocts a "new" Messiah who gleefully exterminates mankind and finally occupies the White House. It has to be added, at this point, that in his youth Mr. Vidal once planned a political career which was supposed to take him in due time to the same digs, but his first attempt to run for Congress was a total disaster. Ever since then, he has channeled his *amertume* into an attack upon the commonality of this country, which he cannot pardon for endowing its citizens with the good life and socio-political fairness. His life and work are deeply immoral, not because he idolizes sexual deviation and corruption of feelings—a matter between him and his intimates—but because he obscenely scorns and scoffs at what other people cherish as normalcy—their modest but most prized possession. It can be taken for granted that thousands of Americans of his ilk will enjoy *Kalki* and its message sufficiently to put him on the best-seller list again. The *New York Review of Books* will help. □

The American Scene

Privates & Privacy: Notes for a Demi-Jeremiad

by Stephen K. Oberbeck

You could start almost anywhere, but let's begin with this new pop record album's cover: Van Halen, a recent Warner release. Heavy metal, with the sweaty lead-shouter rearing back from his crotch-planted hand-mike, an electronic, metal-tipped, amp-wired phallus. A pose similar to one in a tape cassette ad featuring Johnny Winter, I think, clasping the mike between his thighs. Tina Turner and other rockettes pick up this implication in performance and push it: high-decibel fellatio.

Or notice how you can "flick your Bic" (or "get stroked in the morning") but you aren't supposed to "squeeze the Charmin" (Nanny'll spank hands for that). Why is "come" the most used word in American advertising ("Come Up to Kools," "Come to Where the Flavor Is")? Why are the Virginia Slims ladies ("You've come a long way, baby"), smirking satisfaction in flippy chiffon, always pointing (with a finger or a digital Slim) to their privates and putting down "those fat things men smoke"?

Do models for *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* and Saks and Bonwit really always go through life with their hands in the pockets of their fly-away whipmaster vinyl outfits?

Mr. Oberbeck, a former Newsweek *literary critic and free-lance writer, runs an advertising and consulting agency. Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706) was a German composer and organist of excellence.*

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Why does a movie such as "Looking For Mr. Goodbar" feature a scene in which each measured thrust of a stud pickup's wand evokes the ecstatic cry "Oh God!" from star Diane Keaton (whose lower middle class, Catholic background has carefully—excuse the expression—been laid out)? Did the condom reference in "Saturday Night Fever" elicit a great, knee-slapping guffaw when you saw it? Did you expect a zoom-shot to a circular crease in the guy's wallet? Did you "get off on" the candid language? Did the movie "yank your chain" or "push your buttons?" Can you spot the unifying thread in the progression from *Playboy's* squeaky clean sexpots (who love hockey and horses) to *Penthouse's* raunchier bods (who love lotsa grass and sex) to *Hustler's* noncrypto, haw-haw perversions?

It needs no streetcorner Savonarola to recognize, after confronting today's typical mass market book, movie, pop record or advertisement, that this is not quite what Adam Smith (a scholar of moral philosophy rather than a mere economist, by the way) had in mind when propounding free-market principles. Today's invisible hand—or too absurdly visible—is ever reaching towards somebody's genitals. Mechano-erotomania swaggers the land, baring its privates. We face (often with a self-reassuring little snicker) some kind of weird, societal conspiracy-of-the-open-raincoat. Surrounded by an apparent and subliminal media sex-bath—its sounds (any heavy-breathing disco record), its symbols (almost any erogenized magazine ad), its sights (most movies and as much as TV can get away with), its smells (musk, body-maskers, lacquered androgyne)—we rock between the literal bosoms of some maniacal, commercial sex goddess, pouting orgiastic promises at us or urging us on to greater statistical heights with greased vibrators or condoms copied from the face of the star-nosed mole.

Bigger, longer, deeper, stronger! Wave after wave comes crashing at us on the street, on buses, subways, on radio, as we sit thumbing a magazine at home, written in the sky, stencilled on sidewalks, in drugstores and supermarkets (we all know why those deodorant cans are shaped that way; the super-phallic drain decloggers are the ultimate orgasmic promise). It becomes a trial simply to sink into bed with a consenting adult and read a good book (it's there too, relentlessly panting).

I'm not ranting that we-gotta-clean-up-America. But people are getting suicidally blithe about perhaps the most rewarding and most private aspect of human existence: sexual fulfillment. I prefer, given current fashion, a slightly more "dirty little secret" era. Not kinky, repressed Victorianism; not "Spanker's Monthly" obviously. But wasn't it nice—if you can remember—when they let us alone, when we had our own private sex lives, sanctuaries to which we could repair for solace, expression, renewal, exuberance, even raw release?

Yet release seems to be the equation's front-end today. Release from humanity in mechano-orgasmia. Spin the record and the dolls begin to dance. An old theme: remember "Nutcracker." "The Red Shoes." "Faust." But "Saturday Night Fever" again: did you catch the passing dance sequence in which the teasing star begins pressing Travolta's imaginary buttons? R2D2 with electronic French tickler. Golem and gonad. Modern ethic.

Commercial mass media's do-it-to-me, do-it-to-me tattoo (the latest disco delirium is a good example) is fast becoming pop America's public theme song. As William Bryan Key says in his exposé of subliminal advertising, *Subliminal Seduction:* "As a culture, North America might well be described as one enormous, magnificent, self-service, subliminal massage parlor." Key, who may possess a keenly developed sense of the put-on, attacks one aspect of the total psychic massage. He catalogs an impressive number of examples revealing the consciously contrived subconscious sexual (or death-related) cues in today's print advertising and packaging. It's hard for most people to believe that there's even more sex—subliminal at that—in Joey Heatherton sprawling invitingly on the Serta. Key's book, and my own poor file of adman "etchings" should convince anybody however.

That ad men are slipping genital symbols, suggestive words or disguised sex acts into their ads (or merely using a clever sexually symbolic motif to psychologically jar viewers) is only one important aspect in a much larger issue: the wholesale invasion of human privacy—and profanation of sexual privacy—being carried out daily by mass media. Pop culture has not only penetrated our bedroom; it's wormed its way into our very unconscious via a synergy of seeming erotomania. Why "seeming"? Key and others (McLuhan in *The Mechanical Bride,* especially Gershon Legman in his exposé of pop culture, *Love & Death*) explain how symbolic media psychosexual perversions can sorely infect one's actual sex life—ruin it, pervert it, make it schizo. But that is another matter, too involved to take up here. The Open-Raincoat conspiracy—in which we are sold on a massive, pervasive invasion of our own privacy—is an open conspiracy of common goals: $$$$ and perhaps the malign power to set the dolls spinning to one's own manipulative tune. It boils down, in fact, to a matter of asking the motivational researchers or ratings wizards what must be done to move "product." Sex—and death—sell these days (watch the Bacardi rum ads for intimations of mortality).

Sex sells in amazing ways. One could go on—cataloging the sexual sell from apparent (phallic hair driers and deodorant cans) to subliminal (microscopic ice cube orgies). The ads are purposefully packed with oral sex, also voyeurism, masturbation, fetishism, sado-masochism as well as "straight" sex—but always with a sly, suggestive sneer that marriage isn't dirty enough. The idea—the sell—is to confer moral permission, as Key points out, and associate it with your product.

All this devolves on a crushing, sad perception. "Saturday Night Fever," "Looking For Mr. Goodbar," "Police Story"—you name it—are so wrenchingly far from, say, "On the Waterfront" or *Studs Lonigan* and even *The Amboy*

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Dukes. So pitifully and pathetically far in the direction of the open-raincoat routines. The sadness, for me, is that this meretricious assault on personal privacy—especially when it assumes sexual or anti-sexual forms—attacks something sacred and profanes while exploiting.

We are firehosed by mass media with spiritless flesh (even the pimps, whores, addicts and sadists of network TV's series look like heartless, featureless mannequins) and cozzened into pursuits of pleasure that leach mystery and sanctity from sexual relations. A national singles-bar mentality gnaws at our vitals. "Is There Life After Disco?" asked a recent *Rolling Stone* cover blurb. Flippant, cute; but consider the progression's implication: Is There Life After Death? Is There Sex After Death? Is There Life After Disco? From immortality to "Saturday Night Fever" in two flashy Salsa whirls. And the other sad aspect is that the idea of sin, or temptation (defined by implied resistance) is disappearing in the do-it-to-me delirium. Resisting temptation—*recognizing* temptation—learning control, savoring guiltless release (admittedly a function of love, procreation, tandem striving) seems to be going out the window. Think of mere fidelity: how can one handle that challenge without some practice? How can one learn the dynamics of moral decision in an atmosphere of do-it-to-me?

When societies reach the "anything goes" stage, they are in decline. When anything goes, nothing matters. The open conspiracy of mass media has the simple goal of separating consumers from their money. Its attack on control—not repression—is an assault on an individual's ability to reject rank, undiscerning consumerism, an attack on our ability to make rational choices. The subliminal, synergistic approach heralds attempts to break down our powers of discrimination—and, more importantly, self-perception and self-determination. In the adman's ideal equation: You peek, therefore you are.

Frenchmen say when the boat begins to sink: *Sauve qui peut!* Every man for himself. This is far more pessimistic than a simple *caveat emptor.* But I'm always stunned to recognize that we've been moving in two simultaneous directions as our technology (and media thrives on technology) proliferates—outward and inward. Technology extends the senses, moves us out. We see "spaceship earth" from the moon—and DNA's double helix magnified seven million times. The farther out we move into the ontological ionosphere, the more we feel a corresponding need of our own spiritual Fort Apache, our final sanctuary. Something must jar us from the synergy of pop culture's cumulative commercial dehumanization. It does no good to talk of a single book, or movie, or pop record album or current style of dress. The final target is our last redoubt. The unconscious. Our most private place.

I'm for defending mine. I'm putting on Pachelbel's *Cannon* for the 47th time. □

Stage

Glitters of Neo-Inanity

***Chicago;* book by Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse; directed and choreographed by Bob Fosse.**

The Broadway musical comedy was once full of inanity and charm. Today, it is full of inanity and meanness. Neither formula can claim artistic superiority. However, it's well-known that the former once procured money, fame and world-wide admiration. Nonsensical fairy tales about success, love, dancing and singing became Broadway folklore and an American native art. Its newer breed has replaced its simplistic naiveté with pseudo-smart jokes about hip depravity and the facetiousness of violence.

Chicago, a mid-seventies Broadway hit authored and directed by Bob Fosse, an old New York-Hollywood hand, is now on America's roads. It's sleazy and entertaining, it provides images of scintillating cheapness of taste and paucity of thought, together with excellent choreography and first-rate vaudevillian actorship. It fails miserably on two counts. Unlike its more pristine siblings from the past, it is unable to project itself as a true-to-the-core *couleur local* period piece. It is unable to capture the climate of an era and a place, such as New York in *Guys and Dolls, Forty-Second Street, West Side Story,* London in *My Fair Lady,* or Paris in *Gigi.* Nothing in *Chicago* gives it that quality which indelibly depicts Chicago—like the novels of Algren and Farrell, the music of Chicagoans and Armstrong's Hot Five, or Ben Hecht's *Front Page* did. Nothing but neon signs flashing on stage inform us that we are in Chicago. The meager book purports to convey the Chicago ambience through a street-ballad-like morality tale about the corruptness of women, official justice, and vulgar, fast-talking lawyers. This kind of seaminess, although certainly germane to Chicago in the '20s, is far too universal to be a convincing and endemic metaphor. The authors, however, being minions of the Liberal Culture, did not waste the opportunity to promote their profound message: the spectacle ends with the American flag giving credence to their persuasion that America is the hotbed of all corruption, debauchery and decay. The two singing heroines supply the ideology—they firmly assert that *only* in our free nation can such sinister but glitteringly danced events happen. (ES) □

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Screen

An Upright Farce and a Cheerful Fib

House Calls; **directed by Howard Zieff; written by Schulman & Epstein; Universal Studios.**
American Hot Wax; **directed by Floyd Mutrux; written by John Kaye; Paramount Pictures**

by Eric Shapearo

A trifle of a movie about a widowed surgeon (Walter Matthau) who finds happiness with a divorcee (Glenda Jackson) loaded with human and feminine virtues. It doesn't fare too well as a comedy, even less as a farce: an exceptionally vulgar scene on the acrobatic potential of sexual intercourse deserves special notice as the most doleful attempt to extract slapstick from carnal techniques in the history of the cinema. But the overall message is one of the charms of monogamy and the joys of fidelity. Matthau and Jackson do everything possible to overcome the cheapness of the script and plot and bring to life the old-fashioned idea of relishing *one* person in the stead of many. They do it by way of the new sexual pseudo-smartness, and if this is a signal of a Hollywood drift to neo-normalcy, we approve. Apparently Hollywood senses that the sleazy romanticism of one night stands is on the wane, but it is still reluctant to jettison four-letter-word and sexual hipness. As an amiable, prosperous physician, Matthau can have any gal in town—and the town happens to be L.A.—but opts for a 32-year-old (on screen, of course) Jackson with a teenage son. She insists on exclusivity and monopoly, to boot, and gets everything. Thereby, poetic justice is rendered to maturity, the "moral" is preserved, while endless talk about sexual feats whirls around, securing the movie its immediate, socio-historical "relevance."

* * *

Before it was transmogrified into the specious art of social protest, rock'n'roll was all spontaneity and exuberance. In the late '50s, it was still a lower-middle class phenomenon, the music of Italian butcher boys in Brooklyn, truck drivers in Mississippi, black high school students in Harlem. Elvis had already been canonized, Little Richard was considered an artist, and Fats Domino was still ranked as a hipster, not a trivial square. It was essentially *petit-bourgeois* music, its rambunctiousness notwithstanding. It flexed the fattish muscles of prosperous, overfed, Eisenhower America and raised the decibel level of its daily beat: rock'n'roll's beat was *big* but no longer poignant—as jazz had been when it erupted and engulfed the American musical culture. In spite of its rhythm-and-blues origins, rock'n'roll had corroded the musical and poetical dramatics of the blues.

A Cleveland disc jockey by the name of Alan Freed was an early entrepreneur who saw the potential of this subcultural phenomenon: he was involved in pushing it on the air, organizing mammoth concerts in New York City and taking payola for any kind of promotion—a practice which landed him in court. Now a movie has been made, in full accordance with the *Zeitgeist,* and Freed emerges from it as a sort of Brooklyn Saint Sebastian who was martyred by the local D.A. and police for his idealistic quest to bring musical redemption to the "kids." The fact is that rock'n'roll was, from its outset, the anthem of boisterousness and rowdyism, there were stabbings at musical shows and before long the drug traffic made its appearance. Nonetheless, it is fatuous to discuss repression, "vigilantism" of the police and Mr. Freed's sainthood through martyrdom when one takes into account rock's historically documented (and financially evident) triumph. Thus, the movie is pure falsification, except for the music itself which is of course pure nostalgia. Mr. Mutrux displays talent in handling *couleur local,* that is the cheerful seediness of the Brooklyn rock'n'roll milieu which he portrays with a sure hand and effective, though broad, strokes. Perhaps one of the most obvious of the falsehoods which constitute the fiber of the story is that Mr. Freed is given credit for having invented the term rock'n'roll—displaying a shoddy ignorance of the history of Afro-American musical patterns. This expression was used as early as the turn of the century in New Orleans by the honky-tonk musicians, and by the "professors," that is the pianists who entertained in the World War I Storyville brothels. And it had a variety of meanings, some quite remote from playing or singing. □

Journalism

High Times' Neo-Hitlerism

Under the title "Rock and Hitler," *High Times,* a monthly dedicated to the extermination of American youth through the unrestricted use of drugs, prints the opinions of a certain Danny Fields, manager of the Ramones, a punk rock group:

". . . Can you blame a generation born after the end of World War II for being fascinated with what was certainly the most insane episode in the history of mankind? Can anyone who thinks about, sober or stoned, not be intrigued—even obsessed—with what the hell went down when a runtish madman invented an entirely new civilization in his own image and then nearly conquered the world?"

"Nazi Dog (a successful rock group) has no intention of turning your grandmother into a bar of soap. These contemporary artists, and most nonartists of their generation, are just digging into a body of

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mythology extremely rich in fictional and stylistic possibilities."

As the *High Times* clientele reads their guiding gospel under a haze debilitating to minds, we may soon discover the effects of "fascination" and "obsession" with Nazism and its "stylistic possibilities." □

Los Angeles Times' Critical Method

What's an Establishment?

In its current connotation, it is the ruling inner circle of a society, a neighborhood, or a culture. It is a group of people which holds the chief measure of power and influence within a social organism. And which possesses sufficient means to suppress the public spread of bad opinions about itself.

An establishment establishes an offical, even sanctified, view of itself—and this view is not to be challenged. According to the United States Constitution, every view can be challenged in this country, and no establishment has ever openly denied this prerogative to Americans. However, a constitutional right is one thing and its implementation another. Various establishments have successfully blocked their detractors. In fact, an establishment begins by establishing its power to disallow criticism of its views. The simplest method is to cut off the means of free expression and stifle voices that might call into question the establishment's official image.

Americans generally disagree on who is the current establishment. The left sees the establishment in posh suburban country clubs, Wall Street banks, and on the bridges of nuclear aircarriers. But the fact is that any obloquy can be written, printed, aired and broadcast against country clubs, stock brokers and aircarriers. However, the same cannot be said about American liberals, fellow travelers and former communists. The best example of this subtle making of an establishment can be perceived in the establishmentarian machinations of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review.* There, *The Romance of American Communism,* Ms. Gornick's apotheosis of former communists and their larger-than-life imagery, is reviewed by Ms. Jessica Mitford, a recent panegyrist of communist innocence. One would like to think that it is only fair to seek out proponents of the opposite view to write criticism of a polemical book. The pro-communist liberal establishment, of which the cultural sections of the *L.A. Times* are a solid fixture, is above such a crude notion of balance. The first commandment of an establishment is to never lose its grip on events. Thus, in all "fairness," former and unrepentant communists review books by the anti-communists and pro-communists as well. And, thanks to this infallible method of liberal book reviewing, Senator McCarthy is remembered as America's only calamity, but none of the subversive forces he opposed. □

New York Magazine's Paranoia

Listed below is a modern exegesis of why people, according to *New York,* are interested in birds, and the reason why people, especially wealthy people, make substantial donations to museums to found art collections.

> "And talking about hidden sources, why does the Cooper-Hewitt collection have so many depictions of birds? Is there a Freudian explanation? The collection was formed by two maiden ladies (the Hewitts, granddaughters of Peter Cooper). A bird, as any Italian can tell you, is the point of the male sex." □

Gannett News Service's Literary Criticism

The following is an excerpt from a syndicated review of Gael Greene's pornographic novel *Blue Skies, No Candy.* The review is distributed by the Gannett chain to its newspapers—that is by a powerful press enterprise with dailies in countless towns throughout Middle America.

> ". . . the book, although it had a few moderately good fantasies, doesn't even succeed as good erotica . . . Anaís Nin has Greene far outdistanced in the erotica department. In Greene's book, the bedhopping ends up merely repetitious instead of tantalizing . . . The greatest shame about this book is that some writers have been holding it up as an example of feminist fiction dealing with sexual liberation. Although written by a woman, *Blue Skies, No Candy* didn't strike me as representing a woman's point of view or fantasies."

A few words of comment:

Gael Greene's novel is trendy trash fiction. It feeds on the worst kind of liberal-pornographic syndrome for middle-brow consumption. The not-too-refined reviewer, a woman whom Gannett's editors obviously have chosen as their spokesperson for this purpose, plainly directs her efforts at a not-too-refined audience. She adopts a prepackaged stance: a bit of prefabricated feminism coupled with a strong support for modified pornography. Most peculiarly, she does not condemn the novel for what it is, but what it is not: the Gannett critic accuses author Greene of not providing proper "fantasies," that is sexual fantasies. Those that Greene does provide seem to the Gannett reviewer only "moderately good," or not sufficiently "woman's" fantasies.

Some questions arise. Are sexual fantasies, that is pornography, a low-brow demand today? Is it "better" pornography that Gannett editors want books, novels, literature to supply their readers with? Is the American housewife, the Gannett press' most likely reader, a "low-brow," as the Gannett editors seem to imply she is? □

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Chicago Tribune's Officiating

Jane Fonda, a talented movie actress and an attractive woman, is a self-avowed pro-communist who is more effective at engineering pro-communist sympathies at large than any Marxist book, proletarian movie or revolutionary lecture. She once served the communist authorities in Vietnam by giving credibility and respectability to Hanoi's most atrocious lies. No one knows what motivated her: doltishness or anti-American venom. She herself would probably be unable to distinguish between the two. But whatever her actions and the reasons for them, America paid her back generously with money, a successful career and many opportunities to speak her mind. As well as with a non-stop stream of publicity. Among her most adulating worshippers seem to be the editors of the *Chicago Tribune:* its Sunday edition of March 26, 1978 carried a giant cover story in the Lifestyle section presenting her as a paradigm of virtue to Chicagoans. The feature ended with her husband Tom Hayden's words: "She's a more important character than any character she'll ever play."

On January 26, 1978, the People section ran another story on Ms. Fonda in which she said: "Joy is having a reason for living. Joy is having belief. Joy is knowing that you are part of a historical force that can make life better for people—"

There is nothing wrong with these words. Only one little hitch: there are dozens of women in America, equally attractive and talented in their own fields of activity, who experience joy and have a reason for living, who have beliefs, who know that they are part of a historical force that can make life better for people. Let's name one: Phyllis Schlafly. She meets all the criteria Jane Fonda lists as necessary for her own prominence and can add to them an educated mind and scholarly erudition.

But can we imagine *her* picture adorning half a page of the *Chicago Tribune?* No one, not even the *Tribune's* editors can deny the selflessness of her beliefs. However, hers are *not* liberal or pro-communist beliefs. Thus, she serves the wrong "historical force" and, of course, cannot "make life better for people." Her commitment is as ignored as Jane Fonda's is trumpeted, pushed, admired and adored. Which is just one way of officiating in favor of a pro-communist. □

Polemics & Exchanges

Is the Liberal Establishment for Real?

by Arnold Krupat

The righteous indignation the *Chronicles* brings to the dissection of cant in our culture is heartening. The vulgarity, irresponsibility, amoralism, and opportunistic sensationalism blandly carried forward by much of our literature and applauded by too many of our reviewer/critics deserves only scorn and is in need of precise deflation. It isn't quite today, as Yeats saw it once, that "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity." Rather, it's that too many of the worst have free access to the microphones, while others, better, if not the best, find the airwaves—the publishers and galleries and concert halls and large-circulation magazines—closed to them. But when the *Chronicles* places the entire blame for this situation on some monolith it calls "The Liberal Establishment" there is a real danger involved.

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There probably is a "Liberal Establishment" or something like it, and probably it has a very great deal to answer for. But once a crusade against specific instances of error lapses into a crusade against a single Devil, criticism becomes theology and a grand ideological touchstone—some notion of the True Faith—replaces attention to particulars. When that happens—if that happens—"critical inquiry," that brave and strenuous project, must cease, for anything that can be associated somehow with the Evil Monolith *must* come in for wholesale condemnation. The next step—as if this one weren't bad enough—is an inevitable yearning to roust the Devil and install God—or, in the usual case, simply to replace one Establishment by Another, ridding the world of Them in favor of Us.

I don't believe culture is well-served by any Establishment, Liberal or Other, although it is well-served by the editor of *Chronicles of Culture's* stated commitment to "critical inquiry"—which, I would suggest, involves strict standards of rationality as applied to the scrupulous analysis of each individual case examined. This, to be sure, is wearisome. But what less than this would be worth one's effort and energy?

In illustration of some of the above, I would point out that *Rolling Stone* which is brought to our attention unfavorably in regard to Percy's *Lancelot* (and regularly boxed for placement in the stocks), might be instanced more favorably in regard to Sara Davidson's *Loose Change* (loose enough, apparently, and sufficiently changeable to have become a

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smarmy TV soap). *Rolling Stone's* reviewer pointed out the myopia and sentimentalism of Davidson's view of the sixties, as well as her plain inaccuracy in a review more severe even than that of the *Chronicles.* In the same way, the *New York Review of Books* which seems a regular whipping boy for the *Chronicles* (is it *only* something in me that brings metaphors of corporal punishment to mind?) was even more disapproving of Morris Dickstein's *The Gates of Eden* than the *Chronicles'* reviewer. (Of course *NYRB* gives its reviewers more space than *Chronicles* does, and I wonder whether—apart from special issues like the Nabokov number—expanded reviews might not on occasion be useful, perhaps to allow for fuller treatment of those books that seem neither unequivocally excellent nor entirely a "waste of money," but the sort of problematic middle case that is so often richest in possibilities for analysis.) *NYRB,* I might point out, was also intensely critical of Galbraith's *Age of Uncertainty.*

In the *Chronicles* review of Galbraith, he was condemned for his hatred of the rich—an attitude properly condemnable, I imagine, in that it treats "the rich" as a race (even more than a class) *all* of whose members are the same. But then the note on the reviewer tells us that he "now chooses to work for the Phillips Petroleum Company." Does that imply that some wholesale admiration for the rich is a more sensible attitude than Galbraith's alleged wholesale hatred? That, of course, would be as absurd as suggesting that all Jews are—or are not—usurious; that all Blacks have—or have not—"rhythm"; that all WASP's are—or are not—emotionally restrained. This same thing occurs in the "Feminine Novel of the Seventies" number when the note on Mr. Tyrmand states that he "believes that men write better about women than vice versa." Mr. Tyrmand may believe that statistically this has been the case in the history of fiction, or even that, given the dreadfulness of the work under review, this would almost seem a possible conclusion. But Mr. Tyrmand, I think, is far too intelligent and sophisticated to believe—as this note implies, perhaps unintentionally—that there is something inherent in women and men that guarantees such an inequality.

These two notes on contributors leads to another point, the issue of what I would call misplaced pugnaciousness. This is hardly a suggestion that *Chronicles* be wishy-washy "nice." The ubiquity of crap in our culture is enraging and it is exhilarating to find anger expressed where anger is surely a rational and healthy response. But I don't think arguing passionately about whether the rich are admirable or hateful, about whether women write better about men or men about women are the most fruitful grounds for emotion or analysis. In these instances, a kind of *ad hominem* and *ad feminam* perspective would only deflect from what is genuinely inadequate about Galbraith's work, what is genuinely wrong with current "feminine novels." To sound the call to battle as it is—apparently—done in those contributors' notes deflects anger from the areas most properly in need of it.

One further suggestion. Since it is abundantly clear that the best work does not always make its way to the public through established channels, it might be valuable for the *Chronicles* to try to be aware of work brought forward in other ways. The New York State Small Press Association, for example, has a 1977 catalog with some thirty-six pages of listings. Some of these—so far as I can tell—are no more than extreme versions of the usual junk; but there are things that seem interesting. It's not the easiest matter to pick out small press books genuinely deserving of critical attention, but it might be worth the effort. The same is true of an increasing number of self-published books. If once it was reasonable to assume that all self-publication was "vanity" publication (whether through the Vanity Presses, or not), now, in the age of commodity-books and the absorption of the major publishing houses into corporate conglomerates, perhaps it is no longer reasonable. (But self-publication was always an important factor in American literature: Thoreau and Whitman published their first books themselves and so did Pound and William Carlos Williams and quite a surprising number of other "classic" writers.) *Chronicles* might do a real service to culture by occasionally bringing some of these books to wider attention than they might otherwise receive. (My own particular recommendation is Robert Nichols *Red Shift* available for $2.50 from Penny Each Press, Thetford, Vermont 05074.)

A review that is not merely a sales agent for junk is vitally important, and one with a clear-stated "point of view" is eminently useful—even for those who do not necessarily share that "point of view." I would urge only that the "point of view" of *Chronicles of Culture*—and *any* point of view—be tested regularly against the canons of rational "critical inquiry": this, I think, requires vigilantly painstaking attention to particular details and individual cases, a withholding of praise or blame until the facts are in. That's not easy to do these days. But it is worth trying. □

From time immemorial, politics and culture have overlapped one another; it would be impossible to draw a line to separate them from each other in the panorama of history. Cultural factors have engendered political deeds and determined political circumstances. Although aesthetics—a cultural element—has been instrumental in many fraudulent and mendacious acts of the past, it has now become a manipulative element of the political function.

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